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CLAUSEWITZ ON CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS: WHAT HITLER

SHOULD HAVE KNOWN

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CLAUSEWITZ ON CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS: WHAT HITLER

SHOULD HAVE KNOWN

The word state is identical with the word war.
Prince Peter Kropotkin, 1885[1]

Introduction

As the above quote implies, as long as there are states, there are bound to be wars.

History has certainly borne that out, particularly in the last century, with two state-centric world

wars and over 50 million deaths in World War II alone.[2] Although the states engaged in these

conflicts reflected various forms and styles of government, ranging from dictatorships to

democracies, most possessed an element of civilian leadership and a subordinate military force.

Carl von Clausewitz, the great German war theorist of the 1800s, wrote with depth and insight

concerning the relationship between the statesman and the military commander. Interestingly,

his ideas apply uniformly regardless of the style of government that frames its civil-military

relationship.   As such, the lessons learned from a dictatorship like Nazi Germany can be applied

to an American democracy today.

Although Adolf Hitler was defeated during World War II for a number of reasons, this

paper will argue that a primary one was Hitler's dysfunctional relationship with his military

leadership, which is a situation that could potentially plague any state today. This thesis will

become clear by first reviewing what Clausewitz had to say about a healthy civil-military

relationship, followed by an analysis of where Hitler and the German General Staff failed in that

regard. Hopefully, a few nuggets of wisdom can be gleaned from this analysis, which can then

be applied to America's current civil-military relationship.

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[1] Daniel B. Baker, *Power Quotes* (Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press, 1992), 325.
[2] John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy* (New York, NY: Pantheon Press, 1986), 3.

At the Feet of Clausewitz

On the topic of civil-military relations, Clausewitz recognizes that there are no clear lines of responsibility between the statesman and the commander.[3] Rather, he makes the case that there should be an overlap of knowledge and understanding to create a near seamless execution of their aggregate responsibilities. The goal, therefore, is to minimize the potential for misunderstanding between those determining policy and those commanding forces. As outlined in this section, Clausewitz presents three concepts that form the basis of an effective civil-military relationship. First, during the initial war planning stages, the political objective must be established in order to determine the nature of the war, as well as the military objective and means. Second, as the war unfolds, the factors that originally determined the political objective become exceptionally dynamic and require constant review. And third, as the conflict comes to a close, victory is defined not by the military commander, but by the statesman. Consequently, the statesman and commander must maintain an open and honest dialogue before, during, and after military conflict.

This dialogue is particularly important as the statesman begins to contemplate military action. One of the statesman's first responsibilities is to establish the political objective for which the war is to achieve. The commander must be a part of this process to ensure the "designs of policy shall not be inconsistent with the means." In other words, the commander must inform the statesman if the political objective is attainable through the use of military force. If not, the political objective may need to be modified.[4] Once the political objective is determined, the next step is to define the nature of the war. According to Clausewitz, this stems from the original motives for war and can range from "political existence" (national survival) to supporting "an

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[3] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 607, 608. The tone and tenor of Clausewitz's discussion regarding a "major military development" show that *both* the statesman and the commander need to be involved in determining the appropriate course of action; however, lines of responsibility are not clear.
[4] Ibid., 87.

alliance that no longer seems to reflect the state's true interests."[5] Consequently, "not every war need be fought until one side collapses."[6] Therefore, the level of effort and intensity will vary depending upon the motive or nature of the war. Next, the military objective and the means are determined. These two items form the basis for military strategy, and are largely defined by the political objective. Clausewitz captures this idea by stating, "The political object—the original motive for war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires."[7] As such, the statesman and the commander should ensure the military objective and the means remain congruent with the political objective. Once done, the next step is strategy development where the means are applied in coherent ways to achieve the military objective. From that effort comes campaign planning where specific engagements and battles are defined. To this, Clausewitz states, "Policy of course, will not extend its influence to operational details," but it can be felt "in the planning of war, of the campaign, and often even of the battle."[8] The bottom line is that any major military development considered by the commander should be reviewed by the statesman to determine potential policy implications.[9]

Once the political objective has been communicated and the corresponding military objectives and strategy defined, care must be taken to ensure these overarching elements remain congruent with one another as the war progresses. Clausewitz is very clear on this point. The military cannot be handed a political objective with unrestrained authority to pursue it. Civilian leadership must retain oversight—the political object "must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the

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[5] Ibid., 88, 94.
[6] Ibid., 91.
[7] Ibid., 81.
[8] Ibid., 606.
[9] Ibid., 607.

political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow."[10] Not only can the political

objective change during war, but so can the military objectives and strategy. Clausewitz simply

states, "that in war many roads lead to success."[11] But each "road" must draw its origin from the

political objective. For that reason, the commander "must also be a statesman" to understand the

changing political situation and to realize "exactly how much he can achieve with the means at his

disposal."[12] As is the case in pre-war planning, the statesman must know "the instrument it means

to use." Clausewitz adds, "If policy reads the course of military events correctly, it is wholly and

exclusively entitled to decide which events and trends are best for the objectives of the war."[13]
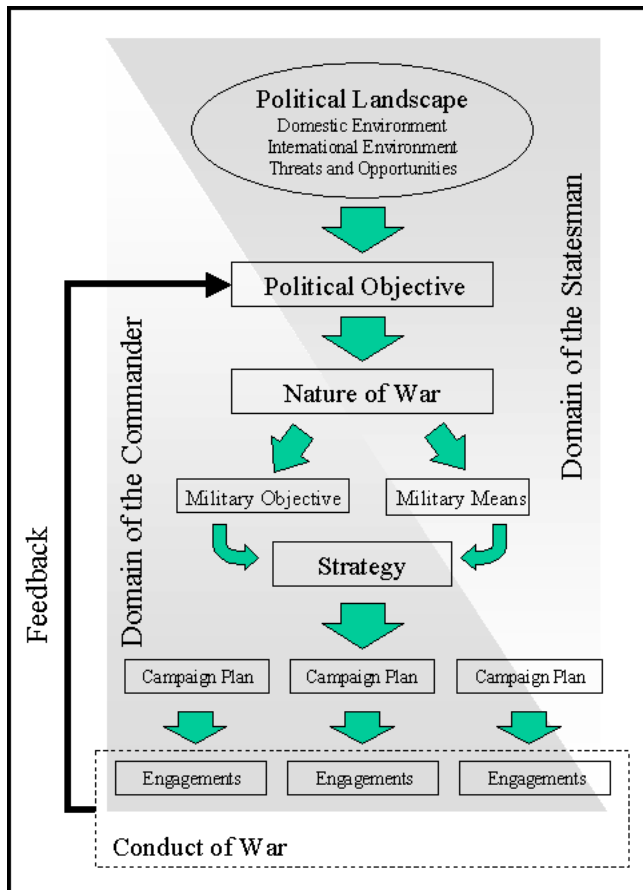

Fig 1: Clausewitzian Civil-Military Relationship

Thus, a check and balance of sorts is created. The goal is not to balance power or authority between the two positions, but to ensure there is balance or equilibrium between the political objective and the conduct of war. This is checked from two different viewpoints—the statesman monitors the course of war to ensure political objectives remain valid, and the commander remains knowledgeable of the political situation to ensure military strategy does not stray from policy.

This check and balance process must continue throughout the war, including those

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[10] Ibid., 92.
[11] Ibid., 94.
[12] Ibid., 112.
[13] Ibid., 607.

activities that precipitate peace. As stated above, the political objective defines the nature of the war, but it also determines the criteria for victory. If victory requires the defeat of the enemy's forces, then "military aims and political objects of war coincide."[14] In this case, the military commander requires little interpretation of when to cease military actions. On the other hand, if the political aim is less than the defeat of the enemy's forces, then "the conflict will seem increasingly *political* in character."[15] As a result, the statesman must not only monitor the situation very carefully to ensure the situation does not get out of control, but also to determine when limited political objectives have been met, and subsequently when to enter into the peace process. Achieving peace, according to Clausewitz, requires the acme of cooperation between the statesman and the commander, to the point "that strategy and policy coalesce: the commander-in-chief is simultaneously the statesman."[16] This exemplifies the true nature of the Clausewitzian civil-military relationship; one that is like-minded in purpose, and entirely complementary in action. In this manner, war would always remain an extension of policy, and never something alien to its purpose.[17]

Adolf Hitler and the German General Staff

Although Clausewitz provides an insightful framework that just about any modern state can apply to its civil-military relationships, success nevertheless depends heavily upon the personalities involved. In order for a "check and balance" relationship to occur, the statesman and the commander must maintain a healthy dialogue. Each must trust the wisdom of the other and listen carefully when concerns arise. Although there may not always be agreement, the consequences could be disastrous if those concerns are never discussed and resolved. When

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[14] Ibid., 88.
[15] Ibid., 88.
[16] Ibid., 111.
[17] Ibid., 87.

looking at the many causes of Germany's defeat during World War II, an obvious one is the apparent breakdown in its civil-military relationship. As discussed below, Hitler alienated much of his military leadership from the earliest days of his dictatorship. This alone can have the gravest of consequences, but he exacerbated the situation by creating a command structure that would not allow an effective dialogue as major military developments arose. The combination of the two was disastrous, ultimately creating a complete disconnect between the political objective and the prosecution of the war.

The first indication that there would be friction between Hitler and his military leadership occurred in 1935 following the denouncement of the Versailles Treaty's armament limitations. Hitler wanted an immediate increase from 100,000 soldiers to 550,000. The General Staff wanted a much slower buildup, and although Hitler initially gave in, he was soon harassing them for swifter action.[18] The next year, Hitler ordered his military to occupy the Rhineland, which would blatantly violate the Versailles Treaty and would be viewed as a hostile act. The General Staff urged Hitler to wait until the buildup was complete, but Hitler would not to be deterred. Reluctantly, the General Staff ordered the occupation, but secretly planned to overthrow Hitler if France retaliated.[19] Shortly thereafter, Hitler reorganized the military without a Ministry of Defense, creating a huge gap in the civil-military coordination process, and partitioning the military leadership between the General Staff and the Army, Navy, and Air Force.[20] This action thwarted a previously planned coup d'etat that was to be executed upon Hitler's direction to invade Czechoslovakia. Although the coup did not occur, the General Staff protested the invasion

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[18] T. N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and the General Staff, 1807-1945* (McLean, VA: Nova Publications), 236, 237.
[19] Ibid., 241.
[20] Larry H. Addington, *The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 195.

because the military was not yet prepared.[21] This too fell on deaf ears. As a result of the events

from 1935 to 1938, the military leadership quickly learned that Hitler would not listen to their

objections, and at the same time, Hitler's behavior of favoring his own opinion over military

advice was reinforced by a string of successes. This caused the civil-military relationship to

become much less interactive, which would ultimately prevent a "check and balance" relationship

from occurring between the political objective and the conduct of the war.

For the time being, however, military successes continued and the military leadership was

becoming increasingly compliant.[22] Poland fell, as did Denmark, most of Norway, Holland,

Belgium, and France. Hitler's political objective of a self-sufficient Germany that would span

Central and Eastern Europe seemed to be progressing well.[23] But quick victories would be no

more. The Battle of Britain failed, and then Hitler found himself fighting a war on two fronts. In

1942, Germany suffered the worst defeat since 1918 at the hands of the Soviets. Hitler's meddling

in battlefield maneuvers, along with an awkward command structure and ill-equipped forces

comprised a recipe for disaster. Consequently, German forces near Stalingrad were thoroughly

defeated, eliminating the possibility of victory over Russia. But Hitler continued to interfere with

operations by delaying action during the Battle of Kursk, making a bad situation worse.[24]

Following the Normandy invasion, battlefield losses on both fronts made an even clearer case that

the political objective needed to be changed, yet Hitler and his military forces continued to fight

futilely. Field Marshal Manstein, one of Germany's finest military minds, wrote about his

"perpetual struggle" with Hitler in his memoirs. "Our repeated demands for the establishment of a

clear focal point of effort at the decisive point … and for operational freedom of movement" went

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[21] Ibid., 246.

[22] Michael Howard, ed., *Soldiers and Governments* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1959), 76.

[23] Larry H. Addington, *The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 195.

[24] T. N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and the General Staff, 1807-1945* (McLean, VA: Nova Publications), 273.

unheeded. This indicated how far German civil-military relations had strayed from Clausewitz's framework. Manstein went on to say that aft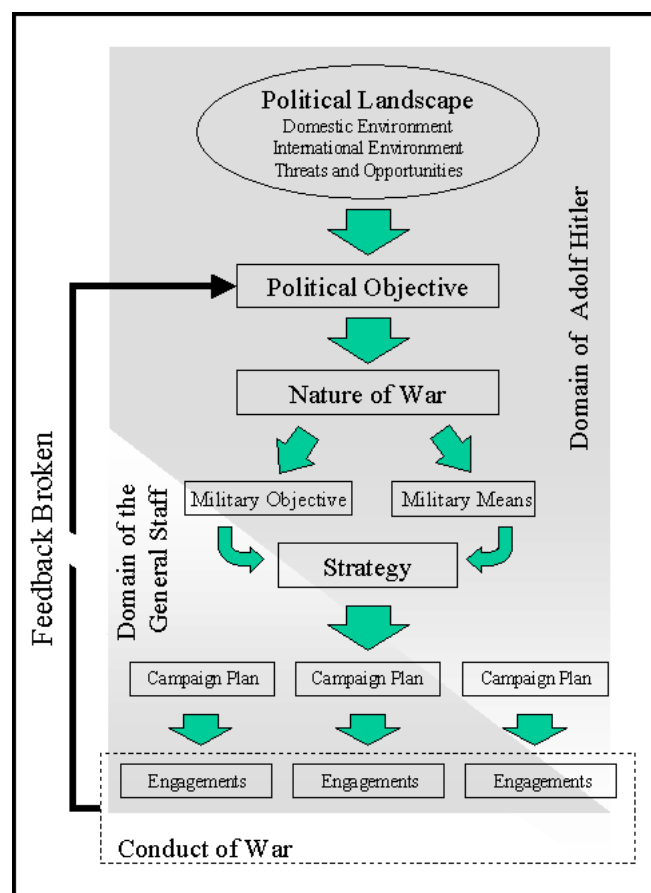er 1944, the German General Staff no longer formulated even military policy or strategy. Hitler, acting as commander-in-chief, minister of defense, and head of state, became dysfunctional in providing coherent and overarching guidance, of which no serious military review was being provided.[25]

Fig 2: Nazi Germany Civil-Military Relationship

Shortly after the July 1944 attempt on Hitler's life and the subsequent purge of those responsible, Field Marshals Manstein and von Kluge independently approached Hitler about resigning his part-time position as commander-in-chief and designating a full-time military commander. Hitler immediately assumed a conspiracy in the General Staff and would not step down as commander-in-chief.[26] By late summer, the war was clearly lost as the Allies gathered momentum, moving through France in blitzkrieg fashion.[27] When Hitler ordered a desperate counteroffensive in December, the General Staff, true to their oath of loyalty to Hitler, executed what would be known as the Battle of Bulge. Over 100,000 German troops and 800 tanks were lost, with no possibility of replacement.[28] Three months later, the country was in

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[25] Ibid., 275.
[26] Ibid., 280.
[27] Donald M. Snow and Dennis M. Drew, *From Lexington to Desert Storm: War and Politics in the American Experience* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharp, Inc., 1994), 170, 171.
[28] Ibid., 171.

shambles and rather than negotiating a surrender, Hitler committed suicide, making his failure as both commander and statesman utterly complete.

During the first several years, Hitler's overbearing approach to civil-military affairs met largely with success. However, as greater challenges arose and more timely decisions were required, the relationship tore at the seams, becoming entirely dysfunctional. As mentioned above, this occurred for two reasons. First, he created a command structure that resulted in Hitler simultaneously becoming the head of state, minister of defense, and commander-in-chief. At the peak of the war, the German army had 7 million members and 300 divisions.[29] From an organizational perspective, this was untenable. Given Hitler's span of control, it was impossible to maintain a dialogue between himself and his commanders. As a result, Clausewitz's advice that the political object and the conduct of the war should be constantly reviewed for congruency went unheeded. Second, Hitler's personality was such that he did not trust the loyalty of his military leaders, plus he had greater faith in his own judgment than the General Staff. Consequently, as the war progressed, Hitler became more focused on battlefield details, leaving no time for strategic planning.[30] While Clausewitz grants policy tremendous latitude in planning and executing war, he specifically states policy should not extend to operational levels.[31] Hitler's constant meddling down to the tactical level had disastrous results. In the end, Hitler failed miserably at both dictating policy and commanding his military forces.

Conclusion

Together, with Clausewitz's lesson and Hitler's example, much can be applied to America's civil-military relationship. On the issue of personalities, America has seen both sides of that spectrum. Gen MacArthur, after being relieved of command in Korea, stated before

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[29] Ibid., 197.
[30] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 119.
[31] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 606.

Congress, "Once war is forced upon us, there is no alternative but to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end." He felt strongly that once war began, the commander should be given broad latitude to prosecute the war unimpeded by policy.[32] President Johnson, at the other end of the spectrum, participated in selecting targets for the air attack in Vietnam in order to influence the war at the tactical level.[33] Personalities can break the system. The message for American commanders and statesmen alike is to understand each other's roles and responsibilities, and acknowledge where the expertise lies.

As for America's command structure, the National Security Act of 1947 and subsequent amendments, such as the Goldwaters-Nichols Act, provided key enhancements to strengthen Clausewitz's dictums on civil-military relations.[34] Requiring the responsible commander-in-chief to report directly to the National Command Authority is exactly what Clausewitz had in mind, but Clausewitz also noted the inherent challenge of the commander remaining cognizant of policy. Making the commander a member of the cabinet was a suggestion; however, Clausewitz explained how difficult it would be to take the cabinet to the commander during time of war.[35] An American solution to that problem was the creation of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This move created as closely as possible a person who is both a commander and statesman, whose role is to facilitate the dialogue that ensures policy and war remain congruent. Clausewitz would likely be most impressed with America's approach to civil-military relations, but then again, it can be argued that it was his idea in the first place.

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[32] Russell F. Weigly, *The American Way of War* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977), 391.
[33] Donald M. Snow and Dennis M. Drew, *From Lexington to Desert Storm: War and Politics in the American Experience* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharp, Inc., 1994), 247.
[34] *The Joint Staff Officers Guide* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2000) 1-41.
[35] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 608.